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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: NATIONAL FORUM - QUIETLY BECOMING A PLAYER

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i.Kent Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b) a
nd (d).

11. (C) Summary/Comment: In the wake of three months of protests, the National Forum seems to have found a message that resonates with the Georgian public. More importantly, National Forum leaders have shown a willingness to do the hard work necessary to build a grass-roots party despite limited resources. Although the National Forum has been registered as a political party since December 2006, it received little attention until the recent protests. The National Forum, like most Georgian political parties, lacks a true ideology but can largely be described as following traditional western-style conservative populism. With a focus on accountability, devolution of power, nativist economic policy and a healthy skepticism on quickly pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration; the National Forum represents a policy alternative to Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM). The National Forum has shown substantial political acumen and an ability, rare in Georgian politics, to critically assess tactics and policy positions. The National Forum is still light on concrete policy prescriptions, but unlike most of their non-parliamentary opposition colleagues, appear to be on an upward swing. End Summary/Comment.

Who Are These Guys?

12. (C) Many Georgians were scratching their heads asking this question before the April 9 protests began. The head of the party is Kakha Shartava, a former Georgian diplomat who served in Moscow from 1996-2000. Shartava is the son of Zhiuli Shartava, a chairman of the Abkhaz Council of Ministers, who was executed after Sokhumi fell in 1993. Shartava is a relative newcomer to politics, only recently garnering national name recognition. Chairman of the Tbilisi National Forum organization, Gubaz Sanikidze was originally a member of the Traditionalist party then subsequently founded the People's Forum with a former chairman of Parliament, Akaki Asatiani (Embassy Note: Asatiani was chairman in the early 90s under Gamskhurdia End Note.) Sanikidze is a trained historian and is the son of another well-known historian. Apparently the use of "forum" references ancient Rome which was Sanikidze's academic specialization. Sanikidze broke with Asatiani and together with Shartava and Irakli Melashvili founded National Forum. According to Shartava, Sanikidze also believes in an independent, strong, democratic Georgia and has shown little notable interest in the West, preferring to focus his political energies and thoughts inward. Political Secretary, Melashvili was a MP in the early 90s. He then headed the NGO, Association for Atlantic Cooperation before working as a lobbyist for AES-Telasi, the U.S. company that won the privatization of the Tbilisi electric grid in 1998.

What Have They Been Doing?

13. (C) Shartava and Melashvili told Poloff a key to their success and increase in stature was the work they had put

into building a grass-roots party organization which was largely unnoticed by political observers. (Embassy Note: In a June 2009 IRI poll, National Forum is the second most preferred party when asked what party voters would support in hypothetical parliamentary elections among Tbilisi voters. Among Tbilisi voters, UNM received 16 percent support, National Forum 13 percent. Nationwide, National Forum is the fifth most popular party behind UNM, Christian Democratic Movement, Labor, and Alasania's party despite being relatively unknown in the regions. End Note.) Shartava and Melashvili believed their surge in popularity after the protests was not a surge at all but a natural outcome of a year and a half of political organizing. Minister for Corrections and Legal Assistance (and also the GoG's democracy coordinator), Dmitry Shashkin told Poloff that the National Forum had done an excellent job of organizing in the regions as well as Tbilisi especially among Georgians who are only moderately politically active. Shartava and Melashvili said the National Forum has a developed party structure and has attracted enough foot soldiers to promote the party's political agenda. This is an important advantage since most other opposition parties are dominated by one person with little structural or grass-roots political support.

What Do They Stand For?

14. (C) National Forum's core message is national self-reliance and a belief that the inherent economic and political strength of Georgia and its people has not been properly utilized. Shartava said that Georgians had a historical problem of placing their hopes on outside organizations or states to solve their problems. Shartava viewed joining the EU or NATO as positive but not an end in itself. Shartava explained that focusing on joining this or that organization obscured the necessary economic and

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democratic development Georgia needed to undertake. In National Forum's view, true economic and political development was only achievable from within. Shartava and Melashvili said the goal should be to improve Georgia and raise it to EU or NATO standards but not view joining these organizations as some sort of magic bullet to solve Georgia's problems. Shartava said discussing the benefits of EU or NATO membership now was a false debate since Georgia was in no way ready to join either organization. Shartava and Melashvili said they supported joining the EU and/or NATO some time in the future but when Georgia would be prepared to be a full-fledged contributor and ally.

15. (C) Domestically, National Forum supports a general devolution of power to regions and villages as the only way to foster true civil society and democratic development. Shartava and Melashvili said the defense budget should be cut and directed towards more social spending. National Forum seeks to direct government resources on small business development and developing Georgia's internal market rather than solely attracting foreign investment. Shartava and Melashvili stressed to Poloff the importance of improving the educational system (with more resources) as key to Georgia's development. As for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Shartava and Melashvili were clear that Russia initiated the problems in both regions but also criticized Saakashvili for making unrealistic demands rather than negotiating with the separatists regimes. According to both, Saakashvili's rhetoric and unwillingness to compromise shut off any chance for progress.

Local Guys Want Self Rule

16. (C) Poloff visited with National Forum local leaders in both Kutaisi and Adjara. The theme that was repeated consistently was that local GoG authorities in both areas were unresponsive to the larger needs of the local populations. In Kutaisi, employment was the main concern.

Local leaders said that constant changes of mayors in Kutaisi created a poor environment for investment. The Kutaisi leaders stressed that local officials should be elected and have budgetary authority which would make them accountable and responsive to their local electorate. Directly elected officials would also serve to promote a better investment environment due to increased political legitimacy. Adjara leaders also stressed above all other issues the need for local officials to control local budgets. They questioned how Adjara could be considered an autonomous republic within Georgia without the direct election of its governor or mayor.

The local Adjara leaders stressed that a truly autonomous Adjara could serve as a positive example for potential reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into a more federal model of governance.

Rumors, Partners and Plan

17. (C) In the early days of the protests, rumors were rampant that the National Forum initially accepted money from pro-Kremlin sources; however, no concrete evidence has emerged to validate the rumors. National Forum was the first to quit the protests, leaving the streets before the May 25 rally. The Forum has been concentrating on continuing to develop its grass-roots political network ever since. Shartava guessed that the National Forum did not experience the same backlash as other non-parliamentary opposition leaders and parties because it never fostered false hopes that Saakashvili would immediately resign. In contrast, Shartava said that people want change but not instability. As a result, the National Forum is pursuing a longer term strategy based on what the Georgian public appears to want. Shartava indicated that they were speaking with Irakli Alasania's party, and to a lesser degree the Conservative party, to find mutually beneficial ways in which to cooperate, but said they had no desire to join any other party. Melashvili added that creating a viable political force was not a short-term process and that much more work was needed before the National Forum would be a major political player able to shape GoG policy decisions.

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